

Managing Student Self-Disclosure in Class Settings: Lessons from Feminist Pedagogy

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Abstract: This article describes difficulties and opportunities associated with students' disclosure of their personal experiences in university class settings. In classes that deal with topics such as violence, racism, family dynamics, mental health or social justice, students with first-hand experience of these topics can bring valuable real-life experience to class discussion. However, bringing intimate information to class may also raise issues of appropriate boundaries and the role of the classroom setting for sharing potentially upsetting information. Drawing on principles of feminist pedagogy and using examples from classes I teach about women and psychology, I detail the challenges related to students' personal biographies and beliefs about their experiences, and outline some strategies that may usefully find balance between respecting their experiences and providing a learning environment while teaching about the values and ethics of an academic discipline.

Keywords: student self-disclosure, feminist pedagogy, classroom management

As a feminist professor, I believe, and teach, that the “personal is political.” However, acknowledging and discussing the *personal* in any class can mean students disclosing information about private and sensitive issues – sometimes academically relevant, but sometimes not. Students’ propensity to detail intimate challenges with issues such as mental health or family violence can be uncomfortable in a classroom setting. Although it may be awkward to deal with students’ self-disclosure, effectively balancing the personal and the political to create a richer learning environment is possible through the use of feminist pedagogy principles.

The techniques and ethics of experiential teaching strategies have long been discussed and debated by teacher-scholars (e.g., Rosenbloom & Fetner, 2001), yet students’ classroom disclosures can sometimes blind-side unwitting instructors. Student engagement in the form of class participation and interaction with other students is considered a way to help make students into active learners, to enhance the educational process and to assist in creating ties of interdependence among students in many academic disciplines (Rocca, 2010), and is thus sought after by many instructors as a means of promoting student success. How can a professor turn students’ accounts of personal or even traumatic experiences into teachable opportunities? While some (e.g., Grauerholz & Copenhaver, 1994; Searight & Searight, 2012) have questioned the ethics of requiring self-disclosure as a classroom activity or assignment, I have found that in psychology classes at least, students often come ready and very willing to share their personal issues, unbidden, with their instructor and classmates. Some commentators suggest that social media networking has served to raise the normative bar on self-disclosure, and that as in face-to-

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face interactions, self-disclosure can lead to increased intimacy (Bazarova, 2012). Certainly, in the realm of interpersonal relationships, self-disclosure about personal matters is seen as a way to increase intimacy and form strong interpersonal bonds (Harper & Harper, 2006). Given the possibilities for fostering greater student engagement and interdependence, it is important to develop an approach to managing self-disclosure in the classroom. The approach I take relies on feminist pedagogy, and highlights classroom dynamics and ideas about welcoming the *whole student* into the classroom.

Feminist Pedagogy

In a seminal article on the topic, Shrewsbury wrote that “Feminist pedagogy is engaged teaching/learning – engaged with self in a continually reflective process; engaged with the material being studied; engaged with others in a struggle to get beyond our sexism and racism and classism and homophobia and other destructive hatreds and to work together to enhance our knowledge; engaged with the community, with traditional organizations, and with movements for social change” (1987, p. 6). Feminist pedagogy was developed in the 1980s by women’s studies scholars, but its principles are increasingly found in other disciplines (Crawley, Lewis, and Mayberry, 2008).

Feminist pedagogy seeks to infuse particular values into the classroom by paying close attention to inequity, power, and issues of justice, especially as concerns gender. A feminist classroom calls into question false dichotomies such as ‘intellect’ versus ‘affect’ (Durfee & Rosenberg, 2009), foregrounds diversity and pluralism, and values the role of reflexivity and personal experience in learning (Crawley, 2008).

These principles can be challenge to instructors who were trained in or adopted more traditional methods of college classroom teaching. The challenges of applying feminist pedagogy to my courses are twofold: first, to balance my desire to teach the whole student, including their own formative personal experiences, while maintaining an appropriate emphasis on learning; and second, to move past the perceptions that because of their own experiences, students already know everything they need to know. These challenges may be called problems of *biography* and *beliefs*: biography because of students’ own lived experiences, and beliefs because those experiences and the ubiquity of such issues in popular media shape students’ conclusions before they ever begin a course on the topic. Students’ personal, peer, or family experiences (specific to my classes on psychology and women, these experiences often have to do with mental illness, sexual assault and intimate partner violence), and their beliefs about the causes of each can result in a superficial, atheoretical understanding, or even in victim-blaming. Anecdotally, it seems that some students are attracted to certain classes in hopes of developing better self-insight, to find help with personal problems, or to understand their own family histories and dynamics. Others assume familiarity with social issues like substance abuse, family violence, sexual assault, or suicide from their consumption of popular media, which often mines social issues for sensationalistic material, trades in gender and racial stereotypes, and ignores structural inequalities. Such familiarity may lead to personal self-disclosure in humanities or social science classes in a way that may not occur in, for instance, a math class. The challenge for these classes, then, has been to find an appropriate balance between the personal, the political and the pedagogical, while illuminating the structural and institutional underpinnings such as poverty and inequality that the media rarely highlight as contributing factors in personal or family struggle.

Strategies for the Classroom

How can these problems of biography and belief be transcended in a classroom, so that self-disclosure is used in a positive way, and students are challenged into new ways of thinking about familiar old topics? I will outline some strategies I have been working on that borrow heavily from both feminist pedagogy practices and research in social psychology.

Honoring the Personal While Maintaining Boundaries

Consistent with principles of feminist pedagogy, I find it is important to acknowledge, rather than avoid students' own experiences in the classroom. As Forrest and Rosenberg (1997) wrote, "honoring personal experience as a valid, reliable, and significant source of knowledge creates a rich, more complete picture from which theoretical assumptions and empirical findings can be explored and checked for accuracy" (p. 186).

What personal concerns are students bringing into university classes? There is an increasing likelihood that they suffer from serious mental health issues (NAMI, 2012). Searight and Searight (2012) pointed out that up to half of all college students experienced recent symptoms consistent with a psychiatric disorder, primarily mood disorders, and that many of those students had not sought help with their symptoms. A U.S. National College Health survey (American College Health Association, 2012) found that over half of female university students reported feeling "overwhelmingly anxious", and over a third of female students reported feeling "so depressed, it was difficult to function" in the past year (American College Health Association, 2012), while a large-scale random internet survey found more than 17% of U.S. students screened positive for depression (Eisenberg, Hunt, & Speer, 2013). Another random survey found the prevalence of positive screens for eating disorders at over 13% for undergraduate women (Eisenberg et al., 2011). Certainly, both men and women struggle with mental health issues, and students of both sexes may seek out certain classes to get information that could help them cope; women, however, are attracted to psychology, women's studies and humanities classes in larger numbers. This raises the opportunity to discuss gendered experiences of and expectations around mental health issues; as Ussher (2011) has pointed out, "madness is a gendered experience, with 'symptoms' judged differently in women and men, and certain diagnostic categories more likely to be applied to women" (p. 12).

I rarely discourage students from sharing their own experiences in class, especially when they are relevant to a topic we are studying, although I try to shape their disclosures to be consistent with what we are studying; I encourage them to connect their particulars to class readings or specific theories and research findings. But while striving to create a class environment in which all participants feel comfortable with disclosure, and where personal experience is seen as another method to underline learning, I also stress that the classroom remain a learning zone rather than a therapy zone. Striking this balance is difficult and not always achieved, but it is an important goal for many reasons: students have paid for an education, not for therapy; some students become unsettled with unrelenting sharing of experiences in a classroom setting; peer effects may result in students who feel pressured to disclose information of a personal nature that they would rather not divulge; animosity or division can result from feelings that one or a few students are dominating class discussion; and, most important, while in a class setting we can provide sympathy or solidarity, we cannot provide the relief that results from sustained care by professionals. Searight

and Searight (2012) rightly pointed out some dangers of treating a classroom as a talk shows confessional:

“[t]elevision disclosures are often seen as a sign of the person’s courage, part of the process of healing, and provide encouragement to viewers to “tell their story”. This social climate may place the instructor in the role of therapeutic talk show host. Within this context, students may feel social pressure to disclose personal trauma and may be concerned that they are ‘in denial’ if they do not share their battles with depression or nightmares of past abuse. Today’s college students may also have unconscious or implicit expectations that the professor receiving their disclosures will view them positively for their raw candor (p. 18).

I make it clear to students that although I may teach about psychology or therapy, I am not a licensed clinical psychologist; I do find it important to maintain an updated list of local professionals for referrals. I also ask students to respect each other’s learning in class discussions, and to think about the boundary between talking for the sake of airing a thought, and trying to move our understanding forward. I also remind them that in a classroom, although we do ask everyone to be respectful of each other, there is ultimately no confidentiality and that what is said in class may not remain private. (This is even more the case in light of newer regulations about mandatory Title IX reporting of sexual assault disclosures on campuses). For the most part, I have found that a great deal of up-front explication about boundaries, confidentiality, reporting issues, and guidelines about respectful classroom dialogue to be fairly effective, although there is often a student or two who may need a subtle reminder of our aims. As with most campuses, my university runs a mental health counseling center to which I often refer students who are experiencing significant levels of distress. Any instructor who is concerned about students’ struggles should become familiar with all campus resources.

I assign one reaction paper that allows students to write from a personal point of view. By doing this, I am able to screen these more personal papers for signs the student might benefit from a referral to our counselling center or another mental health professional.

Building Empathy

Second, I focus on bringing the object or ‘other’ in from the outside, which encourages students to engage in some cognitive restructuring. Empathy is defined as emotionally identifying with and cognitively adopting the point of view of someone else (Davis, 1994). Recent conceptualizations of empathy suggest that it is a less dispositional quality than previously thought; in other words, empathy may be situationally induced in college students via explicit instructions to imagine oneself in certain scenarios (Konrath et al., 2015). The role of the classroom instructor, therefore, is to present social issues in ways that are relatable to students.

Consistent with social psychology’s common ingroup identity model (Gaertner et al., 1994), a woman or man who has beaten or sexually assaulted, or who has been inappropriately labeled or medicated, can be presented and understood as *any* woman or *any* man— as subjects, rather than as objects. This can be done in many ways: by pointing out that survivors of violence are very likely to be present in the classroom; by inviting professionals who work at local domestic violence shelters to class; and by encouraging students to participate in specific campus and community activist events. More subtle strategies can also be useful in recategorization efforts, Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Vol. 17, No. 1, February 2017.

such as paying attention to language. For example, I try to use the pronoun ‘we’ when I talk about the mentally ill or about victims and survivors of violence. This strategy does not require anyone to disclose personal experiences, nor is it intended to minimize the pain of such experiences by claiming victim status. But it may help to avoid labelling as ‘others’ those individuals whose lives and struggles we study. After all, one in four U.S. women will experience physical abuse by an intimate partner during her lifetime (Black et al., 2011); more than a quarter-million adult women annually report rape or sexual assault (Berzovsky et al., 2013); and, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 17 million American women, or one out of eight, experienced poverty in 2015 (Tucker & Lowell, 2015). It’s important to emphasize the ubiquity of such experiences, rather than as pathological, marginal or deviant. And having these experiences validated through readings and classroom learning can be affirming to those who have struggled with issues of mental illness, poverty, or violence (Phillips, 1998).

In a class on domestic violence and rape, I assign a ‘conversation report’ early in the semester, in which students write about conversations they are required to hold with friends or family members about violence against women. Sharing these reports in class allow diverse students to have discussions about different sub-cultural norms, for inner-city students to learn that there exist in close proximity to our university small farming towns where adults still believe that such topics are not appropriate for polite discourse, and for students from small towns to learn that for others of our students and their families, living in a shelter is not uncommon.

Diversity, Built-In

A central strategy of feminist pedagogy (and multicultural psychology) is to ensure a multiplicity of voices is represented, and as we teach students who are themselves increasingly diverse, it is important to address different facets of diverse human experiences (Phillips, 1998). I do this with content and assignments throughout, rather than in a particular section of the curriculum. My aim is to use materials that do more than include minority groups as emblems of poverty, misfortune or disorder. Rather than adding a reading about, say, minority women’s mental health, I try to choose a variety of materials (readings, films, online resources) that embed as many elements of diversity as possible. As a few examples, we cover mental health problems associated with racism and the minority stress model (Clark et al., 1999); the special risk of violence against the trans community and the challenge of reporting violence in same-sex relationships; treatment options for rural families; local resources for women whose first language is not English; differential psychiatric treatment of the wealthy and the poor throughout history; and the risks of violence against elderly and physically disabled women. Students give presentations on gendered violence and its impact in different sub-cultures, such as the military, immigrant communities, and professional sports.

In other classes, students read first-person historical narratives in addition to more standard research articles, which further invites them to develop empathy for the actual lived experiences of, for example, being committed to an asylum against one’s will, being mis-diagnosed, or being mistreated. The use of first-person narratives may implicitly elicit students’ own stories; certainly, it can help to validate them. Although we know that patterns occur, there is not a single story of abuse nor is there a single story of mental illness, so the personal approach can help students work harder to understand human problems and solutions.

Societal vs. Individual Level Explanations

A final and perhaps most difficult strategy is to try to illuminate structural and institutional explanations for abuse and mental illness, and to challenge our culture's propensity to blame women for their own misfortune (Chesler, 2005). Nearly 30 years ago, Fine (1985) noted that mainstream psychology tended to overlook the role played by structural inequalities, and that "idiosyncratic characteristics such as personality traits or gender are advanced as explanations of economic, social, and/or psychological conditions" (p. 174). Similarly, in my class about family violence, I take care to point out the differences between an individual (e.g., mental illness) perspective and a societal (gender inequality) approach to understanding the problem (Nicholson, 2010). It helps to present ideas about social inequality that may not be standard material in introductory psychology courses; for instance, I have students read the APA's 2007 "Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Girls and Women". Depression is a good example of a problem that may be viewed in either individual or societal terms; as LaFrance (2009) noted, "although often de-emphasized in the mainstream literature, the link between violence against women and depression is well established" (p. 18). By examining data that illuminate the structural correlates of depression, such as violence and economic distress, students may begin to gain an understanding of the social as well as the personal nature of issues. I like to quote the finding of an APA task force on women and depression: "Poverty is a pathway to depression" (McGrath et al., 1990), despite the fact that some continue to focus on women's reproductive capacities as a cause of depression (Ussher, 2011). By introducing students to notions such as structural racism and institutional sexism, they may come to conclusions that go beyond conventional understandings of issues (such as 'she stays with her abuser because she has low self-esteem,' or 'her hormones make her vulnerable to depression'). To offer a more societally-based narrative, it is necessary to acknowledge the impact of sexism and racism, poverty and ableism, trans- and homophobia on people's lives.

Conclusion

Student self-revelations in classroom settings need not set off panic in instructors; instead, there are ways to use and shape personal disclosures to achieve class objectives. By being transparent in the classroom and directly addressing the learning opportunities raised by student self-disclosure, instructors may achieve the twin goals of inculcating deeper learning while respecting the *whole student* inhabiting the classroom. I have found that simply putting notices urging 'let's all be respectful of others' into a class syllabus has not been as helpful at balancing these two goals as being upfront with students about my methods from the start. Rather than inventing new methods that would allow me to balance learning with respect for individual experiences, integrating principles of feminist pedagogy into class planning has helped me to fashion a balanced approach in the types of classes that tend to elicit student self-disclosure about sensitive issues.

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